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SUBJECT: SOUTHEAST TURKEY'S ALEVI COMMUNITY UPDATE

Classified by AmConsulate Adana Principal Officer W. Scott Reid, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This message is from AmConsulate Adana.

¶2. (C) Summary: Southeast Turkey's Alevi population is deeply alienated by perceived Sunni attempts to change Turkey's secular identity and is asserting its concerns more widely, including in EU institutions, and seeking to establish a higher profile for its agenda in Turkey's EU accession process. End Summary.

¶3. (C) During a mid-December 2005 visit to Mersin's Haci Bektasi Veli cultural association, Alevi religious leader (called dede) Mithat Guler told us that the land for the group's newly-built cultural center was provided by the municipality (one of Turkey's few large municipalities in traditional pro-Alevi Republican People's Party (CHP) hands), while member donations provided funds for construction. The cultural center is one-third complete, but already provides a large cafeteria, one thousand person capacity cem evi (Alevi worship hall), morgue and office spaces. Once a library, museum, and school are added to the center, the group anticipates that it will be the largest Alevi center in the region.

¶4. (C) Guler told us that the Haci Bektasi Veli group was not content with the GoT's national religious curriculum since it does not allow Alevi teachers to teach about the Alevi religion in school courses. Guler emphasized that what is currently being taught about Alevis is presented through a Sunni perspective, taught mostly by Sunni instructors. Guler said that the Haci Bektasi Veli Alevis are members of the Alevi Confederation and pay taxes to the state, but receive no benefits from Diyanet (Bureau of Religious Affairs) policies. Guler said that two schools of thought prevail among the Haci Bektasi Veli group: some would like to see the establishment of an Alevi desk within the Diyanet to coordinate Alevi issues related to education and state affairs (Note: this is an approach also advocated by the Cem Evi foundation. End Note.), while other, more secular-minded Alevis called for a complete separation of church and state. This group demands that no state money be allocated to keep (Sunni) imams in the employ of the GoT.

¶5. (C) In January meetings with various Adana Alevi groups, such as the local chapter of the Haci Bektasi Veli association, and the Pir Sultan Foundation, Adana Alevi leaders reflected a greater sense of anxiety which they ascribed to the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party's hold on local government and the lack of tolerance for any beliefs other than Sunni Muslim tenets. They said they had been forced, by perceived indifference to their requests for relief from mandatory religious instruction for their children, to join a broader Alevi suit to this effect in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). They said that the apparent GoT perception that the case would be decided in favor of Alevis was offering the promise of some future administrative flexibility, but predicted that anticipated

GoT adjustments would be "token." As an example, they noted that the Adana Governor's office had said that its decision to allow the Adana Hacı Bektaş Veli Association and Pir Sultan organization to merge into the Adana Alevi Association, thus using the word "Alevi" more openly, was a regulatory relief for the community. Community leaders discounted any such claims and said it instead showed the shallow level of commitment of a perceived Sunni-dominated government to religious freedom and diversity in Anatolia.

¶16. (C) Adana Alevis also recounted their (so far unsuccessful) several-year effort to gain a construction permit for a parcel of land that they have purchased privately and unsuccessfully sought to have designated a "place of worship" under recent laws widening the designation of such areas to facilities other than Sunni mosques. They recounted meetings with Adana (AK party) mayor Aytac Durak in which he reportedly told them that they needed no cem evi and could worship at a mosque. Scoffing at such a suggestion, several dedes recounted how common Alevi worship practices, such as use of music, male-female common worship, dancing and veneration of images were unacceptable to Sunnis. "If we went to the mosque and started to worship like (Durak) suggested, Sunnis would run from the mosque to wash themselves and chaos would break out," a dede explained. "He is just trying to deflect outside interest in the issue and demean our form of worship," another Adana dede said.

¶17. (C) AMCON Adana's PO has heard similar pronouncements from Durak when he inquired as to why the city's sizeable Alevi population lacked a single cem evi. The question evoked a long monologue from Durak to the PO about how Alevism was not a religion and he provided for all the facilities which Adana's faithful need. Municipality

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contacts later told consulate contacts that Durak was "furious" that outsiders would raise religious freedom issues, which they had no grounds to discuss with the GoT. Yet another municipality contact said that he has several times advised Durak to moderate his opinion of Alevis on purely political grounds, but that Durak has steadfastly refused to budge from his prejudice.

¶18. (C) Nevertheless, Alevi contacts recount that in the last 2-3 weeks, Durak's advisors have indicated to them that Durak, responding to broader AK party thinking on the likely outcome of the ECHR ruling, is considering allowing the one site sought by Alevis as a cem evi to be so zoned. Other Alevi contacts say that they have heard similar reports like this before and are taking a wait-and-see approach.

¶19. (C) The sizeable Kahraman Maras Alevi community also seems to feel isolated and is avoiding contact with the consulate even though Mersin colleagues have encouraged them to speak with us. AK party contacts in Kahraman Maras reacted coolly to even the mention of religious diversity as a dialogue point, indicating the Sunni domination currently in stark profile there.

¶10. (C) An Adana contact, who is a human rights advocate, said that Alevi groups had reached a consensus that outside pressure was the only form of pressure likely to gain leverage on GoT thinking and that they intended to better organize their various associations and organizations to work with western European Alevi groups to lobby the EU systematically. The same lawyer then criticized the U.S. for what he called under-reporting on Alevi issues in its human rights report. He said that the U.S. needed to appreciate that, "Were it not for Alevis lending religious diversity to Anatolia, Anatolia long ago would have become another religious theocracy like Iran, only a Sunni one instead of a Shia bastion."

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